

The Prince of Graustark

(Continued from Page 5)



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back to enjoy his companion's rage. An hour later Dank and Count Quinnox might have been seen seated side by side on the edge of a skylight at the tip-top of the ship's structure, engaged in the closest conversation. There was a troubled look in the old man's eyes and the light of adventure in those of his junior. The sum and substance of their discussion may be given in a brief sentence: Something would have to be done to prevent Robin from falling in love with the fascinating Miss Guile.

"He is young enough and stubborn enough to make a fool of himself over her," the Count had said. "I wouldn't blame him, 'pon my soul I wouldn't. She is very attractive—ahem! You must be his safeguard, Dank. Go in and do as I suggest. You are a good-looking chap and you've nothing to lose. So far as she is concerned, you are quite as well worth while as the fellow known as R. Schmidt. There's no reason why you shouldn't make the remainder of the passage pleasant for her, and at the same time enjoy yourself at nobody's expense."

"They know by instinct, confound 'em," lamented Dank, "they know the real article, and you can't fool 'em. She knows that he is the high muck-amuck in this party and she won't even look at me, you take my word for it."

"At any rate, you can try, can't you?" said the Count impatiently.

"Is it a command, sir?"

"It is."

"Very well, sir. I shall do my best."

"We can't afford to have him losing his head over a pretty—er—a nobody, perhaps an adventuress,—at this stage of the game. I much prefer the impossible Miss Blithers, Dank, to this captivating unknown. At least we know who and what she is, and what she represents. But we owe it to our country and to Dawsbergen to see that he doesn't do anything—er—foolish. We have five days left of this voyage, Dank. They may be fatal days for him, if you do not come to the rescue."

"They may be fatal days for me," said Dank, looking out over the ocean.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LIEUTENANT REPORTS.

FIVE days later as the *Jupiter* was discharging passengers at Plymouth, Count Quinnox and Lieutenant Dank stood well forward on the promenade deck watching the operations. The younger man was moody and distraught, an unusual condition for him but one that had been noticeably recurrent during the past two or three days.

"What is on your mind, Dank?" asked the Count abruptly. "Out with it."

Dank started. "It's true, then? I do look as much of a fool as I feel, eh?" There was bitterness in his usually cheery voice.

"Feel like a fool, eh?" growled the old soldier.

"Pretty mess I've made of the business," lamented Dank surlily. "Putting myself up as a contender against a fellow like Robin, and dreaming that I could win out, even for a minute! Good Lord, what an ass I am! Why we've only made it worse, Count. We've touched him with the spur of rivalry, and what could be more calamitous than that?"

"This is serious—more serious than I thought."

"It's horrible," declared Dank, but not thinking of the situation from the Count's point of view.

"We do not know who or what she is. She may be—"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but we do know what she is," said the other firmly. "You will not pretend to say that she is not a gentlewoman. She is cultured, refined,—"

"I grant all of that," said the Count. "I am not blind, Dank. But

it seems fairly certain that her name is not Guile. We—"

"Nor is his name Schmidt. That's no argument, sir."

"Still we cannot take the chance, my lad. We must put an end to this fond adventure. Robin is our most precious possession. We must not—why do you shake your head?"

"We are powerless, sir. If he makes up his mind to marry Miss Guile, he'll do it in spite of anything we can do. That is, provided she is of the same mind."

"God defend us, I fear you are right," groaned the old Count. "He has declared himself a hundred times, and he is a willful lad. I recall the uselessness of the opposition that was set up against his lamented mother when she decided to marry Grenfell Lorry. 'Gad, sir, it was like butting into a stone wall. She said she would and she did. I fear me that Robin has much of his mother in him."

"Behold in me the first sacrifice," declaimed Dank, lifting his eyes heavenward.

"Oh, you will recover," was the unsympathetic rejoinder. "It is for him that I fear, not for you."

"Recover, sir?" in despair. "I fear you misjudge my humble heart—"

"Bosh! Your heart has been through a dozen accidents of this character, Dank, and it is good for a hundred more. I'll rejoice when this voyage is ended and we have him safe on his way to Edelweiss."

"That will not make the slightest difference, sir. If he sets his head to marry her he'll do it if we take him to the North Pole. All Graustark can't stop him,—nor old man Blithers either. Besides, he says he isn't going to Edelweiss immediately."

"That is news to me."

"I thought it would be. He came to the decision not more than two hours ago. He is determined to spend a couple of weeks at Interlaken."

"Interlaken?"

"Yes, Miss Guile expects to stop there for a fortnight after leaving Paris."

"I must remonstrate with Robin—at once," declared the old man. "He is needed in Graustark. He must be made to realize the importance of—"

"And what are you going to do if he declines to realize anything but the importance of a fortnight in the shadow of the Jung Frau?"

"Duce, take it, I don't know, Dank." The Count's brow was moist, and he looked anything but an unconquerable soldier.

"I told him we were expected to reach home by the end of next week, and he said that a quiet fortnight in the Alps would make new men of all of us."

"Do you mean to say he expects me to dawdle—"

"More than that, sir. He also expects me to dawdle too. I shall probably shoot myself before the two weeks are over."

"I have it! I shall take Mrs. Gaston into my confidence. It is the only hope, I fear. I shall tell her that he is—"

"No hope there," said Dank mournfully. "Haven't you noticed how keen she is to have them together all the time? She's as wily as a fox. Never misses a chance. Hasn't it occurred to you to wonder why she drags you off on the slightest pretext when you happen to be in the way? Why, by jove, sir, it was only yesterday that she asked me to come and look at the waves. Said she'd found a splendid place to see them from, just as if the whole damned Atlantic wasn't full of 'em."

"'Pon my soul!" was all that the poor Minister of War, an adept in strategy, was able to exclaim.

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